

MEDLEY

- a potpourri of diverse talent

June 2014

USDA-ARS-Midwest Area Diversity and Equal Opportunity Committee members:

James Smith, Columbia, MO

Kelly Barnett, Ames, IA

Atanu Biswas, past-Chair, Peoria, IL

Rebecca Horn, East Lansing, MI

Jane Johnson, Chair-elect, Morris, MN

Charles Krause, Wooster, OH

Don Ort, Urbana, IL

Rich Shukle, West Lafayette, IN

Wayne Colbentz, Madison, WI

Sherri Buxton, Peoria, IL, MWA ODEO Technical Advisor

Theresa Ridgeway, our MWA ODEO Program Manager, also sits on the Council in an advisory capacity. Theresa works from Beltsville, Maryland, and has visited some of our locations as time and travel funding have allowed.

Vision Statement

The vision of the Council is to create a diverse workforce and promote a positive work environment where all employees are respected and valued

Minnesota students learn soil is not “dirt.”

Gary Amundson, Engineering Technician from the USDA-ARS "Soils Lab" in Morris, MN, is a favorite presenter at Conservation Day. For the past several years sponsors of Conservation Day invited Gary to give a presentation on soil conservation to elementary school children. Each year about 300 students from five counties in West Central Minnesota attend.

Students enjoy Gary's visual and hands-on approach. Gary demonstrates how compaction affects soil by comparing the surface area impact of a high heeled shoe to an elephant's foot. The “elephant's feet” are simply two disks of wood that are about the same size as the foot of an average-sized elephant. The students stand on a large piece of foam (like a foam mattress) to see how far they sink into the mattress. Then they stand on the “elephant feet” and get an idea of how much of a difference spreading their weight out can make. This is done along with showing a pair of high heeled shoes and explaining how much more pressure the shoes can exert on the soil. Even the feet of a small woman or child can sink deeper than the elephant feet, albeit over a much smaller area.

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These 5th and 6th grade students gained a new appreciation of soil and learned not to treat it like dirt.

MEDLEY

Midwest Area Diversity and Outreach Notes

Interview with Dr. Donald L. McLellan, Director, Outreach, Diversity, and Equal Opportunity

Dr. McLellan generously took time to be interviewed for the MWA MEDLEY. I would like to quote something from his interview that I think provides insight into Dr. McLellan as a person and a leader.

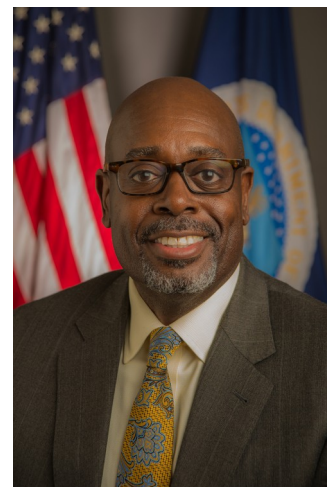
Dr McLellan said: "Find your voice and express it, in your own unique way, to make a difference in the life of someone completely different from yourself. Join a diversity committee, or even better, start a new one! Become a special emphasis manager in your area. Host a diversity event like a book club focusing on diverse authors and topics during lunch breaks. All it takes is just one person who decides that today will be the day that they step outside of their comfort zone to make the life of another a little better. Change starts with you."

Interviewed by Rebecca Horn, Secretary, East Lansing, MI

For those who might read this article and perhaps don't fully understand the importance of the Office of Outreach Diversity and Equal Opportunity (ODEO) to ARS, could you summarize in your words the most important functions of this office and how it benefits ARS employees?

The most important function of my office is working toward the creation and maintenance of a diversified workforce that is free from any form of discrimination, harassment or retaliation, regardless of one's color, race, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability and/or veteran status. We help managers and employees work through conflict, provide training and counseling and assist leadership in identifying diverse talent throughout the United States.

Secondarily, but just as important, is educating the workforce about the civil rights laws and policies that governs both federal and potential employees as well as the clientele that we serve. It is my hope that through these efforts we are able to foster, among all employees, a greater sense of community that values diversity and inclusion of "ALL" people at "All" levels. More importantly, it is my greatest wish to inspire people to not only embrace this view, but to act on it as well.



As the Director of the Office of Outreach Diversity and Equal Opportunity, what do you see as the biggest challenge facing ARS in regards to outreach, diversity and equal opportunity?

The biggest challenge for ARS is finding unique ways to empower or inspire its managers to incorporate the values of diversity and inclusion into their daily business plan. Meaning, reviewing all layers of their individual operations with a diversity lens in order to identify untapped talent among their existing workforce; or actively searching for someone new who brings to the table a unique or perhaps a different set of eyes that may see a problem differently, potentially leading to a better or more efficient solution. That is the true value of being surrounded by diverse people with diverse opinions, it increases the number of possible outcomes for a number of challenges or problems that we face as a world class research organization. Diversity, outreach and inclusion has to be at the core of how we conduct business. It cannot be treated as an afterthought or as a supplement to how we think about our current and future workforce.

If we are going to be the best, we have to seek out the most diverse talent that exists in the marketplace. Many private research and technology firms have recognized this fact for many years and have aggressively recruited the kind of diverse talent that has helped to elevate their organizational status to that of an industry leader.

From your daily experience as Director, how equipped is ARS to meet this challenge?

Well, I think ARS is very equipped to handle this challenge. I have seen examples of individual units and/or locations, in their own way, trying to make meaningful impact on this diversity front. However, advancing this cause within a somewhat restrictive system, such as the federal government, can be somewhat of a daunting task. Change does happen, albeit at a snail's pace, but it happens nonetheless. The key is not to get frustrated with the pace of that change, but instead, to recognize and celebrate that change whenever it finally arrives.

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It is important to note that how we respond to this change will determine how others within the organization will view it, negatively or positively. It also serves as an example for others who may be contemplating similar kinds of bold diversity actions but have yet to find the courage or motivation to do so. During my brief tenure with the agency, I have witnessed some major diversity advancements, particularly at the headquarters level. In time, I suspect we will begin to see more of this type of advancement throughout the entire agency.

What can ARS locations and areas do to address these challenges?

First and foremost, the area offices and locations have to truly believe that diversity and inclusion adds real and tangible value to their respective leadership teams. They have to become champions for diversity and inclusion and seek out diversity advocates among their workforce to help carry that message. Celebrate those differences in ways that make those less represented at your locations feel excited and proud to be a part of ARS. Those few will spread the word to many more within their communities, churches, families and among their friends about how great it is to work for ARS. They will become your most effective recruitment tool.

One has to fully embrace the meaning of diversity in the broadest sense of the word, and are comfortable articulating that meaning to its members and be willing to defend their actions to advance that cause when challenged.

I remember an old saying my mother would use when trying to get me and my younger brother to behave or to do our chores. She would often lecture us on the consequences of not following her orders, however once she realized that her words were no longer a motivator for me or my brother, she would then declare: "I can show you, better than I can tell you"! and of course, we both knew what she meant by that statement. I can assure you that her actions were far more effective than her words. So., as a leading research organization, we can't continue to say that we support diversity and inclusion without taking some real concert actions that clearly demonstrates that we mean what we say.

How has your work experience informed you about the need for an active diversity and equal opportunity mission within the Agency?

I often hear from employees questioning the importance of diversity & inclusion within the agricultural research community. My sense is that people in general have a difficult time understanding the impact of diversity within the context of their individual jobs or responsibilities as an employee with the Agriculture Research Service. So I try to operationalize the concept of diversity in terms or language that makes it a bit more relatable. The concept of diversity is a critical part of scientific discovery...for one very important reason...survival of the species.

For example, if you are studying the impact of a foreign and highly deadly species or organism on a population of animals or on a particular breed of plant life, with the identical genetic makeup, chances are that the entire population of animals or that particular breed of plant life will be completely wiped out. But...if that population is diverse with different or varying genetic makeup, chances are that some of that population will react differently and are therefore more likely to survive the impact of that disease and therefore keep the population alive. So...what it really boils down to is diversity is necessary for survival. This very basic principle applies to the operational side of our agency as well.

What led you to choose a career path in leadership? How did you develop yourself professionally toward this goal?

Well, after completing both my BS and MS degrees in Agribusiness, I began my career as an Agribusiness Consultant with the S.C. Dept. of Agriculture working on behalf of small and limited resource farmers. I later served as an Agricultural project manager with the Governor's office to educate farmers on the benefits of reduced tillage, and then joined Clemson University as a Tri-County Extension Agent focusing on underserved and minority rural farming communities. However, after a few years of trying to improve the ways in which the Cooperative Extension service was delivering information and services to these underserved communities, I embarked on a pursuit of obtaining a Ph.D. degree in Agricultural Education with a minor in administration and supervision from the Ohio State University. My research focused on identifying barriers to working with African Americans as perceived by Cooperative Extension Professionals in the state of Ohio.

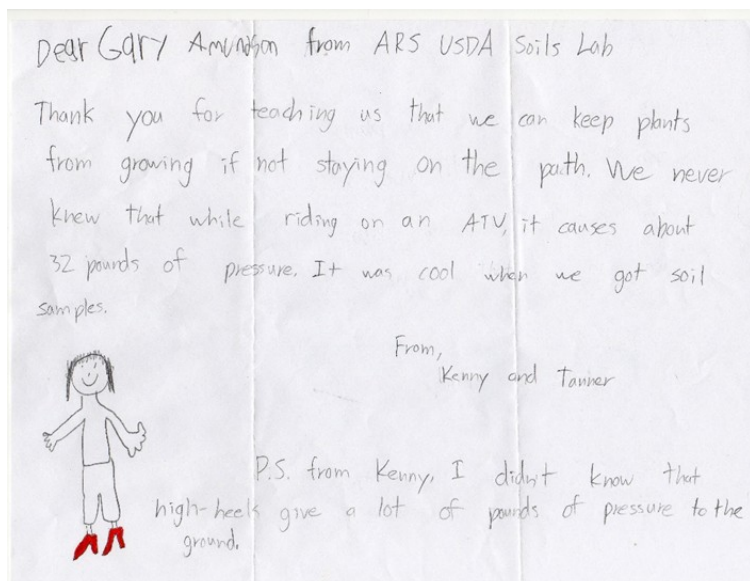
Very soon after, I joined the College of Agriculture at the University of Georgia to head their Human Resources and Diversity efforts for their Extension, Research and Academic units. Seven years later I joined ARS. Although I didn't completely realize then, now I recognize that it was this particular journey that laid the foundation for my leadership development and I continue to grow and build upon that same foundation in my current role. To answer your first question, I'm not sure if I chose this path, I think it chose me.

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Minnesota does not have any elephants but centuries old-wagon wheels left a long-lasting impact. Gary artfully weaves local agricultural history by showing a photo of the wheel tracks created from horse and oxen-drawn wagons on the Wadsworth Trail. Pioneers blazed the trail between St. Cloud in Central Minnesota to Fort Wadsworth located in Sisseton, South Dakota. The old trail is still visible in places. The "Soils Lab" conducted soil compaction measurements on portions of the trail.

Gary uses simple visual tools like wet and dry sponges to teach the kids how a wet soil is easier to compact than a dry soil. Likewise a saturated sponge is in a clear box, that is gradually compressed and so students are able to see the water and air being pressed out. This shows them the reduced capacity of the soil to hold water and air, and roots and animals.

Gary says "... the thing that gets the kids the most excited is taking soil samples and using some other probes to see the differences in the soil. Wish I could still be that excited about soil samples!"



The letters from the students make it clear they thought it was "cool" that they were given a chance to take and keep a soil sample as a souvenir. Aaron and Katlyn wrote "are (our) mom's love them." Migan Ann wrote "I thought it was fun because we get to make and take home soil samples." Kenny and Tanner's letter captured Gary's ability to help the kids translate and apply his message.

Submitted by Jane Johnson, Research Soil Scientist, NCSCRL, Morris, MN Photos from Gary Amundson

Merit in Federal Hiring

Throughout the recruitment & hiring processes, HR Office works collaboratively with the Office of Outreach, Diversity, and Equal Opportunity (ODEO) to ensure fair and equal treatment of applicants to ARS jobs.

- ODEO staff works to raise awareness of ARS vacancies to eligible candidates within diverse groups and persons with disabilities along with ensuring a fair process during recruitment and hiring.
- Human Resources works with hiring officials to ensure we follow the Merit System Principles, hiring policies and regulations are adhered to, and we avoid Prohibited Personnel Practices.
- We work together to answer questions and to provide guidance to hiring managers as needed. This article touches upon a few of the flexibilities available in Federal hiring that could possibly answer some of your questions.

Using Merit Principles to Hire

Merit System Principles provide an overarching framework for Federal hiring. The first Principle is to "Recruit, select, and advance on merit after fair and open competition." What this means in practice is that open competition is usually the first "doorway" to a Federal job. USDA was delegated the authority for hiring from the US Office of Personnel Management. Agencies that violate the Merit System Principles or commit Prohibited Personnel Practices may lose their delegated hiring authority, and the hiring managers and/or HR officials involved may be removed in egregious cases.

Private sector hiring is subject to different regulations when it comes to equal opportunity, and veterans' preference.

- One of the main differences between the public and private sectors is the preference given to veterans.

Veterans preference regulations for Federal hiring are intended to provide more opportunities to veterans, to their dependents in some cases, and especially to the men and women who suffered injuries in service to the country.

- In the private sector, hiring preference and developmental opportunities may go to relatives, friends or preselection is acceptable.

Nepotism and Undue Influence Are Not OK in the federal system. Federal employees may not "appoint, employ, promote, advance, or advocate for appointment, employment

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“How to Tame a Wild Vegetable”

An exhibit, entitled “How to Tame a Wild Vegetable”, engages Wisconsin audiences. Members of Vegetable Crops Research Unit have showcased their efforts to a wide range of attendees at the UW-Madison Science Expeditions and the Wisconsin Science Festival. The audiences encompass all ages and backgrounds, from the Madison area and students from around the state. Many have little knowledge of where or how their food is grown and the efforts that are being made to ensure a sustainable supply of healthy vegetables for their meals.

Over the past year, members of the Vegetable Crops Research Unit have participated in outreach events to showcase their efforts in identifying important traits in wild



Dr. Shelley Jansky and technician Andy Hammernik teach students of all ages about “wild” vegetables.



Wild and cultivated cucumbers, onions, carrots, and potatoes are highlighted.

Submitted by Dennis Halterman Research Geneticist, VCRU Madison WI.

crop relatives and incorporating these traits into superior germplasm. Prickly cucumbers from India, purple potatoes from Peru, yellow carrots from North Africa, and cranberries from Wisconsin are just a few examples of the “wild” vegetables demonstrated at the science station.

Visitors get a chance to hear about where vegetable crops originated and how the modern vegetables found in grocery stores are in some ways different, but in other ways the same, as their wild relatives. Although the exhibit changes slightly each time it is presented, the VCRU has consistently found it to be an excellent opportunity to engage the community and provide hands-on experiences that highlight the research priorities of the USDA.

Ames Employees Provide Experience, Expertise to Youth at State Science Fair

Hundreds of junior and senior high school students gathered at the famed Hilton Coliseum on the Iowa State University campus in Ames, Iowa on March 27th and 28th to participate in the annual State Science and Technology Fair of Iowa (SSTFI). The record-breaking 700-plus students participating were from all corners of Iowa to showcase their research projects and compete for over \$70,000 in scholarships, prizes, and awards during the fair. Each student participating also had the opportunity to receive feedback from judges and gain invaluable experience to better understand the scientific research process.

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promotion, or advancement, in or to a civilian position any (relative)...” friend, or pre-selected employee. This is an important principle for Feds as it is a Prohibited Personnel Practice. Some employees assume it is “OK” to advocate for a relative as long as it is outside of their chain of command, but this is specifically prohibited in the Federal work place.

Merit Procedures...Hiring From Within

Another common way of hiring is the agency’s Merit Promotion Plan, which is designed to open competition for current and former Feds, along with some veterans. Veterans’ preference is different under Merit procedures than DEU. One

way to think about it is that veterans receive extra credit or “points” in most (DEU) hiring, while Merit procedures assume that the playing field in advertising a job within the current government workforce is more level.

Special Hiring Authorities

Over the last few years, there has been an increased focus on hiring veterans, and people with disabilities. Special hiring authorities, such as Schedule A for people with disabilities, and VRA for veterans, can be a good option to bring on new staff quickly, and to enhance diversity.

For more information about hiring flexibilities available to ARS managers in the Midwest Area, consult one of the HR Specialists in the Eastern Business Service Center, or their Team Supervisor, Delisa Robinson, or the Branch Chief, David Glines (301) 504-1337. Or, take a look at these websites and reports:

Merit System Principles and Prohibited Personnel Practices (5 USC 2301 (b) and 2302 (b))

<http://www.mspb.gov/meritsystemsprinciples.htm> or
<https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/performance-management/reference-materials/more-topics/merit-system-principles-and-performance-management/>

Reforming Federal Hiring

<http://www.mspb.gov/netsearch/viewdocs.aspx?docnumber=224102&version=224321&application=ACROBAT>

Coordinated Diversity Initiatives

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/executive-order-establishing-coordinated-government-wide-initiative-prom>

Diversity Requirements

http://askearn.org/refdesk/Diversity_Goals/FederalEmployer_Reg

ARS Human Resources

<http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/hrd/index.htm>

Submitted by David Glines, Branch Chief, EBSC Human Resources (HR)

David Glines is the branch chief for the Eastern Business Service Center Human Resources office. Before he joined ARS, David led workforce planning efforts for the National Nuclear Security Administration. He has worked with several Federal agencies, including the National Institute for Standards and Technology, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service and the US Office of Personnel Management. Before joining the Federal government in 2000, he worked in the private and not-for-profit sectors.

Documenting diversity: Management Directive 715

The Area Outreach, Diversity, and Equal Opportunity Program Manager collects information from the locations/Area offices to be included in the quarterly and annual Management Directive 715 (MD-715) reports required by the Equal Employment and Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Information used for these reports include outreach efforts to diversify the workforce and increase representation in the groups that do not meet the Civilian Labor Force. The MD-715 is mandated by the EEOC to ensure that all employees and applicants for employment enjoy equality of opportunity in the federal workplace regardless of race, color, national origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, religion, and reprisal.

ARS is responsible for reporting to EEOC any identified barriers to employment within the six elements of the MD-715 listed below. A barrier is defined as a policy, principle, practice, or condition that limits or tends to limit employment opportunities for members of a particular gender, race, or ethnic background or persons with disabilities. Practices that are examined for barriers include: recruitment and attainment of supervisory and management positions; hiring and placement; employee development and training opportunities; promotions and other internal selections; performance incentives and awards; disciplinary actions; and separations.

Demonstrated Commitment from Agency Leadership

This element requires agency heads and other senior management officials to demonstrate a firm commitment to equality of opportunity for all employees. As mandated by the EEOC, this commitment to equal opportunity must be embraced by Agency leadership and communicated through the ranks from the top down. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the Agency Head to take such measure as necessary to incorporate the principles of EEO into the Agency's organizational structure.

Integration of EEO into the Agency's Strategic Mission

According to EEOC, agencies must ensure EEO professionals are involved with, and consulted on, the management and deployment of human resources by attracting, developing and retaining the most qualified workforce to support the agency's achievement of its strategic mission. The ODEO Director should be a regular participant in senior staff meetings; have regular access to the Administrator; and be consulted on HR issues. Sufficient resources to create and/or maintain Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (EEO) and Rehabilitation Act programs that identify and eliminate barriers in the workplace, and attract, develop and retain EEO staff with the strategic competencies necessary to accomplish the Agency's EEO mission. To accomplish the goal of eliminating barriers, effective

reasonable accommodation procedures may need to be implemented that comply with applicable executive orders regarding architectural and transportation barriers, as well as electronic and information technology accessibility standards.

Management and Program Accountability

A model Title VII and Rehabilitation Act program will hold managers, supervisors, and EEO officials and personnel officers accountable for the effective implementation and management of the Agency's program. Establish procedures to prevent all forms of discrimination, including harassment, retaliation and failure to provide reasonable accommodation to qualified individuals with disabilities.

Proactive Prevention of Unlawful Discrimination

According to EEOC, agencies have an ongoing obligation to prevent discrimination on the bases of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, reprisal and disability, and eliminate barriers that impede free and open competition in the workplace. If findings of discrimination are made, ODEO is obligated to assess and make recommendations regarding taking appropriate disciplinary against Agency officials involved in the matter. As part of its ongoing obligation, Agencies must conduct a self-assessment on at least an annual basis to monitor progress, identify areas where barriers may operate to exclude certain groups, and develop strategic plans to eliminate identified barriers.

Efficiency

According to the EEOC, the Agencies must have an efficient and fair dispute resolution process and effective systems for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of their EEO programs. The Agency should identify, monitor and report significant trends reflected in the complaint processing activity. Also, the Agency should ensure timely and complete compliance with EEOC orders and the provisions of the settlement/resolution agreements. The Agency should identify and disseminate best workplace practices.

Responsiveness and Legal Compliance

The head of the Agency or Agency Head designee shall certify to the EEOC that the agency is in full compliance with the EEO laws and EEOC regulations, policy guidance, and other written instructions; ensure that management fully and timely complies with final EEOC orders for corrective action and relief in EEO matters.

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For more information on the MD-715 visit Office of Outreach, Diversity, and Equal Opportunity website at <http://www.ars.usda.gov/AboutUs/docs.htm?docid=23071>.

Submitted by Debra (Debby)

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Employees of the ARS Ames location were among the volunteers with who served as judges for the SSTFI . Judges are required to have a major, degree, or background in science, engineering, or technology. Sally Logsdon, Research Soil Scientist at the ARS National Laboratory for Agriculture and the Environment, is a 10-year veteran judge for the SSTFI. She has judged at all levels of the fair, from junior high (grades 6-8) to senior high (grades 9-12) to the Iowa Agri-science FFA portion of the fair (separate but concurrent with the SSTFI). Logsdon commented, “Judging at the science fair is a way to provide encouraging and helpful comments through discussion at the display as well as comments on the evaluation form. Many students refine their projects or develop new areas as they return to the science fair year after year, so I can observe their improvement over time.” This year—Kelly Barnett, Agricultural Science Research Technician at the ARS National Laboratory for Agriculture and the Environment judged for the first-time at the fair. She was impressed with by the multiple benefits this fair offers to the students. “In addition to learning more about the scientific process, the fair gives the students a great forum to develop their communication skills and connect with like-minded peers who have a science interest.” One-on-one interaction enhances both the student’s and judge’s experience of the fair. Logsdon added, “Not only do I get to encourage young scientists, I am able to observe many well-designed projects on a variety of topics. This allows me to

learn from them as well.”

Each year, student research projects are very diverse and cover a wide range of scientific disciplines such as animal science, microbiology, engineering, environmental science, physics, and chemistry. Some research topic examples include: antibiotic resistance, cellulosic ethanol, fire resistance of paint, wind turbines, diabetes, greenhouse gases, color preferences of dogs, and nitrates in Iowa waterways. The projects are evaluated based numerous factors, including scientific thought, thoroughness, creativity, and clarity. The SSTFI is one example of many excellent outreach opportunities for ARS employees. “Judging at the science fair is a way to encourage the next generation of scientists,” noted Logsdon.



Submitted by Kelly Barnett, Agricultural Science Research Technician at the ARS NLA, Ames IA.

ARS promotes and creates a culturally diverse workforce that embraces the values and needs of all individuals. Employees are protected from discrimination and harassment based on the following EEO-related factors: race, color, religion, national origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and political beliefs.

Two forms of harassment that may be encountered are workplace harassment and sexual harassment. **Workplace harassment** is offensive and inappropriate verbal or physical conduct that belittles or shows hostility or aversion toward an individual or group which creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment. **Sexual harassment** is any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's work performance or creates an offensive work environment.

Not all workplace harassment is EEO-related. Those cases not based on EEO-related factors can be addressed through the Administrative Grievance process for your location or the Co-operative Resolution Program.

Filing an EEO Complaint

It is important that you report harassment and discrimination to your immediate supervisor as soon as possible but within 45 days of an alleged occurrence. If the immediate supervisor is the harasser then you should notify the next higher level supervisor.

If harassment or discrimination persists, or you have not received a timely response after reporting the conduct to your supervisor, contact ODEO for immediate assistance and guidance at:

Local: 202-720-3410 Fax: 202-690-0109

Toll free: 800-340-4289 Fax: 202-690-0094

TDD: 202-720-3303

MWA ODEO Program Manager:

Theresa Ridgeway, 301-504-1174

ARS ODEO Staff: Dr. Don McLellan, Director

1400 Independence Ave. SW, Room 3913 South Building,
Washington DC 20250-9911

Phone: 202 720-6161 Toll Free: 800 340-4289

TDD: 202 720-3303 Fax: 202 690-0109

Editors' Note: Thank-you to everyone that took time to write articles. If you have a fun out-reach event to share please submit articles to Jane Johnson (Jane.johnson@ars.usda.gov) or your local ODEO committee representative.

Editors of this issue: Jane Johnson, Atanu Biswas and Rich Shukle